

# CAN WE REMEMBER?

By Joseph N. Smelser

CAN WE TEACHERS remember when we, as pupils, were trying to associate number symbols with real, tangible things? Our teacher said, "This is *one* pencil. These are *two* pencils. When we write a figure meaning *one*, we do it this way. The teacher would then write the figure "1" on the board.

"Now," she continued, "this is the figure you write when we want to show someone that there are *two* pencils." The teacher would then write the figure "2" on the board.

So we remember the disquieting thoughts that possessed us during this experience? There was the thrill that we felt a bit grownup to know all this, of course. But we wondered. We really felt that numbers were far beyond us. Then a most horrible thing entered our heads.

"1" is just one thing on the board; a pencil is just one thing in our hand, too; but the "2" on the board is just one thing, and there are *two* pencils. When we stated our problem to the teacher she threw up her hands and said, "Ah me." We didn't understand.

On our way home a new perplexity struck us: the "1" and "2" on the board didn't look like pencils at all. When we mentioned this to the teacher next day, she threw up her hands again and said, "Oh, your poor little head." We were puzzled.

Besides this tussle with number symbols we had a nightmare trying to write and understand the sentence, "The cat is my cat." The word "the" stumped us beyond expression. "Cat," the teacher said, "*stands* for the little animal we call 'cat'." The word isn't the cat itself; it just *stands* for the *real* cat." By this time we were saying, "Ah, me. My poor little head."

Somewhat later on we became involved with *maps*, the teacher called them. They were shapeless, like Daddy's old underwear on the line, but they had pretty colors. Our teacher said, pointing to the Mississippi River, "Now this long, crooked blue line is the Mississippi River."

Then we were *really* floored. We had crossed the Mississippi River the summer before at St. Louis and it was water and banks, and very big. We thought school was a very stupid place to try to tell us such stuff!

• • • • •

Any teacher knows the delicate task involved in teaching children to understand symbols. The task continues with us teachers, too. We blink our eyes sometimes and suddenly realize that we ourselves haven't learned our lesson too well because, above all

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# AN OLD DILEMMA

By Joseph N. Smelser

FIFTY PEOPLE ARE ON a passenger coach; a window has been lowered to freshen the heavy air. One person objects and the window is closed. No attempt is made to determine whether the other passengers want the window open or closed. The thermometer at the end of the coach reads 79 degrees. Several passengers move into an adjoining coach rather than lower another window. Everyone seems to sense what is going on but says nothing; a few people are visibly nettled but keep silent; two or three look about, settle back in their seats and whisper to one another. The person who had the window closed is leaning back scanning a daily paper with a triumphant air.

How often have we heard *one* person at business meetings of groups dominate discussions and determine decisions by stating his views arbitrarily and uncompromisingly? Have we not also often permitted *one* critic of the schools in a community to exert influence far beyond the worthiness of his criticism? The critic may condemn "modern education", a textbook, a magazine in the school library, or a story which the children are assigned. Then the fearful authorities too often tear about talking with teachers or librarians advising that censorship is to be preferred over poor public relations.

What should our reaction to these one-man affairs be? Must we jump and "close the window" so fast that we pinch our fingers? Should we weigh the facts, look at the "thermometer" and leave the window open? We may be so anxious to preserve the peace that we permit the chronic belly-achers to set policy. We cannot always be "ladies and gentlemen" when we deal with people who are not. The time arrives when we must be honest and tough-minded, even if it costs us. When we start running it isn't always a simple matter to stop.

No one invites martyrdom; so it is probably best to employ group defense, the more representative the group the better. Even then, the critics of the schools will try to single out personalities in an attempt to create the fear of having the "bread ticket" taken away.

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# FINGER POINTING

By Joseph N. Smelser

IN LAST July's Harper's Magazine, Paul Woodring wrote that one of the widely expressed criticisms of the schools is that "The total effect of the New Education is to leave the child, particularly the child of average or less than average intelligence, without a set of values." By "leave" we suppose the critics mean that the "New Education" (unprincipled pragmatism, we presume) not only offers no values but also corrupts the values the child possessed when he entered school—provided he had any when he entered.

We do not propose that schools are doing all that should be done to help young people revere the great values of their heritage. Certainly without delay school authorities and laymen should cooperatively examine the matter and means of education to the end that the child becomes more sensitive to motive and purpose, excellence, responsibility, and relationship. We should wish long life to this refined sensitivity, in and out of school, now and in later life in all walks of life in spite of the familiar presence of "legalities" and special privilege. Some notable progress can be made in our schools, even though we know that the school, like the man, is not an island. But!

We are growing increasingly impatient with a great deal of the finger pointing which characterizes our time. The times are out of joint, yes—just as some of the pointing fingers are. A finger should occasionally be used to remove the mote from the eye of the pointer. What about the false doctrines, the sanctimonious thuggery, depraved methods, crooked thinking, obscene art, superficial and sexy entertainment, scare techniques, deceitful preachments, undermining of free expression, questioning of motives, richly rewarded skulduggery, and primitive assaults upon man's natural dignity—all of which are to be found in the spiritual air the child breathes **outside** the school room?

The schools attempt to teach maturity in social relations through supervised socialized activities; they are called socialistic. Educators are warned to lay off everything but the cold, amoral three R's. Then comes the charge of godless, valueless teaching. May not some of the shortcomings of education be traced to the loss of perspective and courage in the teaching profession due to contradictory pointings of powerful fingers?

In any event, finger pointing will not help; it never does. Institutions are of the bone and flesh forces in the culture which creates them. In our better moments we know we are all of one body. We know that all hands must be clean, whatever the cost, if we are to bless our children with reverence for the great values of the spiritual heritage of America.

MARCH, 1953

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# The Teacher's Desk

## The REACH and The GRASP

By Joseph N. Smelser

The wise men in the quiet of their studies have caught visions of the truth which would amount to error if pressed upon the lives of common men. The insights of the artists and poets have sensed beauty in the rarefied air of the distant heavens which are beyond the survival limits of the masses of men. Living in the cold logic of the mind, the endless beauty of the imagination, and the ethical longings of the heart are one thing, and living with the earthy demands of existence is another. To have a mind that dwells with the gods and a body that lives with the things that creep and crawl is man's tragedy.

These thoughts may have the odor of musty old theologies. The writer at least has seen such tragedy. It is not meant by these thoughts that progress is an illusion nor that civilized man is cursed or must be cursed, with the riddle of dualism. But we all have felt the tug of the ideal against the stubborn will to follow the expediency of the moment. We do not feel that we should surrender to the dismal philosophy of the inevitability of the evils of our day. We feel that the most unworthy of all people are those who fatten on the claim that men are unimprovable. Finally, we do not subscribe to worshiping on the house tops and behaving like beasts in the living room.

This train of thoughts may be applied to teaching.

Many of us are attracted to the logic and beauty of Naturalism; some are convinced by the claims of agnosticism, the practical approach of pragmatism, the mutability of truth and error, and the material basis of the spirit. Some great educators have accepted these beliefs and have built theories of education upon them.

It is our humble belief that the tap root of education must be embedded in the ideals of the culture where we teach. Change must be peripheral if brought about by education; it can and should come only within the limits of general understanding and voluntary acceptance. Change for change's sake is insipid. Building the curriculum about one personality or a theoretical cult carries experimentalism beyond good sense. If society is organic, going it alone is dangerous. Is there anything wrong with teaching within the framework of the generally respected ideals of our culture? We may say: no, but dangerous business. Can the teaching profession exhibit enough unified courage to adjust the matter and method of education to such widely respected

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